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ABSTRACT

Reader-response journals were successfully employed in a "Reading Shakespeare" course for non-majors, making literary tradition accessible to students untrained in classical rhetoric. Students were encouraged to employ any combination of four approaches. First, students were invited to ask questions about the language, sequence of events, characters' actions, and theatrical conventions of the time. As the course progressed, inquiry evolved into the questioning of values held by characters and societies in the plays as well as the society of which Shakespeare was a part. The second approach involved observation of the text to discern patterns of imagery, behavior, and relationships. The third approach encouraged students to make connections between what they read and their own experiences as twentieth-century readers. Finally, students were asked to evaluate the plays and to explore whether or not the characters and events were meaningful to them. Overall, the response journals empowered students by giving authority to their opinions, by allowing them to choose what they wished to discuss about each play, and by permitting the class to explore a variety of approaches and responses to the plays. Essentially, the students became a community of learners, listening to each other, engaging in dialog, feeling more secure in speaking out, and becoming richer for the shared experiences. (KEH)

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Questioning Shakespeare Through Student Journals: a paper delivered at NERC, 1989

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Recently, there has been heated debate about whether or not Shakespeare's works should be taught to our students, and if they should be, how they should be taught. What does this icon of the "traditional" literary canon have to say to students of the 20th century? More to the point, perhaps, how can Shakespeare be made accessible to students who no longer have training in classical rhetoric, British history, or literary traditions? Can Shakespeare's works be read alternately, as suggested by recent feminist and marxist scholars? Can Shakespeare be re-read in terms of the needs of the modern student who is not part of the elitist main-stream culture? Can a study of the plays lead students to a greater consciousness of contemporary social issues? The answer is a resounding "yes," for if Shakespeare is the great poet that traditionalists would have us believe he is, then his work "is for ages and ages in common and for all degrees and complexions and all departments and sects and for a woman as much as a man and a man as much as a woman."(Walt Whitman)

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The problem for me, a Shakespeare-lover, was how to engage students in the work of another era written for many in what amounts to almost a foreign tongue and to make the characters and situations--words without accompanying action--meaningful. The solution was to ask students in my *Reading Shakespeare* course,who were primarily non-majors electing a literature

course, to keep reading response journals. As they read each play, they could choose the issues they wished to explore. These journals were to be written after the student had read each play. Journals were ungraded and were used the following week as a "jumping off point" for our discussions. I would read and comment on each journal entry written during the semester. The journals, however, could take whatever shape the student chose. Surprisingly, students were relatively unfamiliar with the concept of journal writing, despite the integration of reading and writing stressed in recent years as a pedagogical strategy. When I introduced them to my idea of journal writing, I encouraged them to attempt to achieve one of or a combination of the following approaches:

1.Ask 2.Observe 3.Relate 4. Evaluate.

On the most basic level, the "asking" could relate to questions they had with language, with the sequence of events, with characters' actions, with the theatrical conventions of the time, or even the character to whom a particular speech was addressed. I encouraged students not only to raise questions, but also to offer possible answers to the questions they raised. As the course progressed, the "asking" did, however, evolve into a questioning of values held not only by characters in the plays but also by the societies the plays depicted and by the society of which Shakespeare was a part as he was writing.

The second possibility, "observe" was a way for students to become close readers of the text, reading the *text* rather than

the assignment. Some students made their observatins about patterns of imagery they noticed; others observed characters' behavior patterns, and many were concerned with the relationships between characters, particularly between men and women. As students became more comfortable with the forum the journals provided, and as they read more plays, they used their observations to comment on the play in front of them and on the plays they had previously read. In this, the combined their ability to make observations and to relate those observations to different plays throughout the canon.

The third possibility, "to relate," encouraged students to make connections between what they read and their own experiences as 20th century readers. They were encouraged to explore whether or not the characters and events were meaningful to them.

Finally, they were encouraged to evaluate the plays. I wanted them to understand that despite the fact that Shakespeare is considered by many to be one of the greatest writers in the English tongue, he was not beyond reproach or criticism and, perhaps more importantly, they did not have to like his writing.

The only stipulation I made was that they could not consult outside sources--the response had to be their own--and they had to write two to three pages.They might, as one talented young lady did, choose the same topics and perspectives for each play, thus providing herself with a frame work for the twelve plays we read and the raw material for a paper. On the other

hand, they could divide their focus among characters, plot, theme, etc., or shift the focus in each response. By encouraging this approach to the plays instead of simply assigning a play, I anticipated that the course would accomplish several things. First, it would empower the students by giving authority to their observations and opinions. Second, it would empower them by allowing them to choose what it was about each play that they wished to discuss or foreground. In addition, it would eliminate the "straight-jacket" approach to reading literature in which the teacher imposes her own critical perspective on the text. Having been a student in a classroom where the only approach to the plays was the instructor's, I knew first-hand the frustration students can experience if they cannot voice their own readings. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, it would allow the class to explore a variety of approaches to the plays and would show them that some "saw" what they saw while others had radically different perceptions of the same play. In this way, they became a community of learners, listening to one another,each hearing the voice of the other, engaging in dialog and feeling more secure in speaking out, and each being richer for the experiences through which the diverse readers recast the plays.

Some students, however, did not begin the course with any amount of security and wanted some "guideposts" by which they could write their journals. Although I stressed their freedom to respond in any way, I told them that some of the things I

was fascinated by when I read Shakespeare was the use or abuse of power and how power was distributed among the characters in the plays and between characters and institutions. I was also interested in the way Shakespeare's characters used and abused language, as a means of seduction or persuasion; that is, in the intrinsic power of language itself. Finally, I was interested in the way Shakespeare's female characters were presented and to see what, if anything, they had in common with 20th century women. These focuses were merely suggestive, not directive or dictatorial, and students could choose to reject any or all of them in favor of a different approach. Initially, when they responded, most were interested in convincing me that they had, in fact, read the plays, substituting plot summaries for the responses I had asked for. At first, too, journal entries were tentative. With a great deal of hesitation, students not used to having a voice and perhaps more used to work-sheet heaven and finding "the" authoritative reading of a play began to offer their reactions with the qualifiers "I may be wrong, but..." These gave way to genuine reactions and as they read more plays and became accustomed to the format of the class their journals spoke with more authority and they were freely making connections to characters and events throughout the canon as well as to film, novels, and news events.

Because my students came from varied backgrounds and majors. I encouraged them to bring their own areas of expertise to bear on the plays. Moreover, since only two or three students were "declared" or intended English majors, the

majority of the class lacked the preconditioned approach to reading texts which English majors sometimes bring with them. This was, in my view, an advantage in terms of what I wanted to accomplish. Consequently, I had some psychology majors "analysing" Hotspur and Richard III, some political science majors commenting on the power struggles in Richard II and Richard III, some sociology majors noting the family dynamics and social paradigms in Othello and Romeo and Juliet, and some economics majors drawing some interesting insights about The Merchant of Venice. None of this,of course, is new. What is interesting is that non-Shakespearean scholars and, in many cases, first-time readers despite their novice status, were able to tap what "authorities" wrote about. In addition, their journals allowed them to approach the plays from a position of strength rather than from the position of uninitiated.

The student population was also a diverse age mixture, containing returning adults as part of the continuing education program, graduating seniors, a few juniors and many sophomores. Their reasons for taking the course were equally varied. Many needed an English elective, and some, I am sure, chose the course because it met once a week in the evening, making it compatible with a work schedule. I suspect many took the course because Shakespeare was not an "unknown" entity to them.

The week before an assignment was due, we talked a little about the historical context of the play. I did this to circumvent the difficulties students might have had understanding "who was who". Then they would read and respond.

The following week, we would discuss the play. I began each session by asking students to read their response journals to the class. Since I could not allow for thirty readings, I asked two or three students to voluntarily share their journals with the class. As they read, I would list the main points on the board. After the students had finished their responses, we would use the points they had raised as our source of discussion. These discussions were, for the most part, lively and diverse. Students would actively engage one another in discussion, or debate, relying on their journals for some of the "ammunition" they needed to support their arguments or to refute the argument of a classmate.

Despite their different backgrounds, ages and majors, students were surprising uniform in their interest in Shakespeare's social dynamics. They used their journals to ask questions about the relationships characters had with one another, about whether the characters depicted were historically accurate or if Shakespeare had created them. Many were fascinated that what they saw in Shakespeare's plays they also encountered in their own experiences: love, betrayal, friendship, loyalty, parental authority, deception, gullibility, etc.

Since I can't share everything they wrote, I'd like to use examples from the first two plays we read: A Comedy of Errors and Richard III,

We began the course with *A Comedy of Errors*, it being arguably Shakespeare's earliest play and a comedy. Most

students who do read Shakespeare in the context of their high school classrooms study one of the tragedies. Very few students have read a comedy, let alone a history. Many of the journals echoed the problem students had with "believing" the plot line. One student said it reminded her of the Abbott and Costello comedy routine "Who's on First" while another said all she could think of was how "ridiculous," "ludicrous" and "moronic" the whole thing was.

Among the things students noted in their journals which surprised me one was the fact that most of them found the scatalogical humor in the description of Nell to be very funny indeed. I felt the women in the class might comment on the sexist attitude conveyed. They, however, saw it as inoffensive. In addition, they were amused by and not repelled by the beating of the servent, one young man noting that he "especially liked the way the Dromios were beat by Antipholus of Syracuse and Ephesus." They were reading the Dromio characters humorously, in the tradition of the Three Stooges, and refused to impose a class hierarchical commentary on them. They saw the Dromios as the Antipholus' boon companions who accepted their role. Only one young lady commented that she felt sorry for one of the Dromio's whom, she said, got the worst from everyone.

One young woman noted that the most enjoyable scene for her was"when Adriana, wife of Antipholus of Ephesus, jumps to the conclusion that the reason he husband is late for dinner is because he is having and affair with another woman. I found

this most enjoyable because... the episodes of jealousy are common in the twentieth century. I also noticed that people did not listen to each other, as people tend also to do today." Their reactions to the male and female characters were somewhat different from what I would have expected. One man observed: "I take Antipholus of Syracuse, not a comical fool, but as an idiot, blunt in a logical sense. He has been searching for his lost twin for some time and when a strange case of misidentification is presented to him, he infers nothing at all!" Another young lady felt that "the characters acted as if the men were incompetent." In assessing Shakespeare's treatment of women one young woman wrote: "The role of women in the play also posed a problem to me. Shakespeare seemed to give women a role of either a witch or a fool." Another, a psych major, wrote "The first question is why when back in the time of the play did Adriana seem to have so much control over her husband? She speaks of him being her master, but she doesn't show it." Of Luciana, the unmarried sister-in-law of the play, a senior noted "Luciana is supposed to be the sane voice of reason but her subservient attitude towards males annoyed me." Interestingly, one of the men in the class, a business major, observed:"I was struck by the apparent equality the men and women seemed to share" and said he was surprised that Adriana challenged her husband's honor and sanity Publically.

One man suggested that Shakespeare was trying to show that"people take appearance for all its worth," while another

suggested that the play was written not only as entertainment but also as "a warning to be more careful when merely relying on only one of my senses to perceive a particular situation."

RIchard III, an early history play, focuses on one of Shakespeare's most compelling protagonist-villains. I was curious to see how my students would respond to the wooing scenes, to Margaret, and to the very Senecan conventions of the wailing queens. Moreover, I was curious whether this play of political intrigue and machinations would strike a chord in light of the Iran-Contra scandal, the insider trading revelations, and the orchestration of the 1988 political campaign, complete with its own brand of public executions. It didnt. Instead, it reminded them of the movie "Wall Street" and the weilding of power money brokers use. Richard, like Gecko, fascinated them. One of the most interesting observations made about the character of Richard was that he "did not commit any of these murders personally, rather he hired people to do it. This shows that he really wasn't as cold as we think." Another student noted that Richard was "a man driven by his lust for power and the throne. Throughout the play, I found him to be a man with no conscience, yet a man who could easily win the heart of even a 20th century woman with his charm and sweet words." The mixed response Richard elicited was noted by a number of students one of whom said that by seeing Richard's mind she could "understand his emotions and begin to sympathize with him at the same time, you hate him." One young man felt compassion for Richard "when his

deformities were being ridiculed by the young prince." and added that Richard "seems to have a knack for adapting to the people and playing off of their feelings or desires." One woman observed that Richard's character was very much like that of people today, although not as extreme [Here one must wonder exactly what she meant.] She continues "The world we live in is a very power-hungry society. Power means money, and that's what people want." Another woman noticed that "every character was looking out for themselves and their loved ones. They were interested in their own advancement." As to the "wooing scenes," one student noted "What I really did find difficult to accept was the beguiling of Anne, one of Richard's victims being her husband, and, even more so, convincing Queen Elizabeth to plead to her daughter for her hand in marriage? Come On!" Anne and Elizabeth did not do well in the students' initial reading of the play. One man asked how they could be so "shallow" and declared "They have no sense of loyalty to their own and in this respect are no better than Richard. He, at least, is honest to himself and makes no claims to be haughty as the others do by looking down on him." One woman expressed surprise that people could change their minds so quickly "when it comes to giving themselves or their daughter to a villain." She then asks "In those days, were the people that stupid?" Another writer questioned the intelligence of the characters: "What I found most problematic in Richard III," she writes, "was the ignorance or stupidity of the women in the play. Take Lady Anne, for instance; she is willing to forgive

and marry the man who murdered both her father and her husband because he says he killed them so he could have her?! Is she blind?" Anne was also dismissed as a fool. Others raised questions; "Did she marry him because she feared him or did she truly believe he loved her?" Elizabeth also presented the same problems, especially for the female readers who stated they were "upset" with both women. One or two asked if Elizabeth were just "buying time" in agreeing to speak to her daughter. None of them wanted to accept that Richard had power over the women. Only one student suggested that neither Anne nor Elizabeth is taken in by Richard.

After following this format throughout the semester, I asked students to talk about the journals in their course evaluations. I felt that they had been a successful way to approach Shakespeare, but I wanted to hear the students' views. On the negative end of the scale there were two voices, one who said :they helped me understand the plays better , but I felt they were too much work," and another who called them "too strenuous." 2 out of 31. Among the positive reactions noted by many students was that the journals made them "stay up to date" and read more closely and attentively. Another student indicated that writing journal entries made her "rethink the play and realize that I didn't know as much as I thought after one reading. Also writing down my thoughts led to other thoughts that opened up new insights," and many said it got them "thinking" instead of just reading. Some were lavish in their praise, one saying "I loved the idea of the journals" and

felt "more profs should use these." Another said the journals "helped me to see my own abilities to analyze the plays" and one remarked that the journals were "done well" because "it is important to capture your initial reaction to a play because you will never feel that way about it again."

Using reponse journals to question, react, observe or relate empowered students as I hoped it would and helped them to find their own reading of the plays and provided the basis for sharing ideas.